

**Community Design Solutions**  
2307 Lincoln Street  
Columbia, SC 29201

## New Columbia small business helps to rebuild a Gulf Coast city

With family as his “number one priority” and a position as the contemporary worship pastor at the interdenominational Riverbend Community Church, architect and community planner Randy Wilson needed maximum workplace freedom and flexibility. He needed to start his own small business.

But after leaving his public sector job to head his own company, Community Design Solutions, Wilson was unsure of the next step.

Enter the Columbia Small Business Development Center (SBDC).

Wilson first met with SBDC Business Counselor Bob Pettit in March 2005. Through a series of one-on-one counseling appointments and exercises, the award-winning architect of more than 20 years learned to become a successful businessman.

“I was so scared that I wasn’t going to make a profit and I would do anything,” Wilson says, referring to the number and diversity of jobs he had been willing to accept at first, leading to 13 different focus areas.

Pettit helped him to prioritize his business goals and then clarify the focus of his business to four areas: Charrette facilitation (on-site design workshops that engage the public community), photo re-imaging, Main Street services and, of course, design and planning. The new focus became the structure for formulating the business plan.

“It’s like psychological therapy for the small business,” says Wilson, who has continued to work with Pettit, most recently when Community Design Solutions grew to need additional staff.

After only three months in business, according to Pettit, Wilson’s company had already secured three major contracts. And that was only the beginning.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated the communities along the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, Community Design Solutions was tapped to join the Mississippi Main Street Assessment (MMSA) team, consisting of seven community planning groups from around the nation, to help rebuild the historic city of Gulfport. For Wilson, who was born in New Orleans to a family originally from Mississippi, was raised in Mobile, AL and attended college in Mississippi where he met his wife, the work is not “a project, it’s a passion.”

“It’s just so gratifying,” Wilson says. “I feel so humbled by this tangible way to give back to the place that raised me.”

Before Hurricane Katrina, Gulfport had been on the verge of joining the Mississippi Main Street Program, an organization dedicated to downtown revitalization: After Katrina, the Mississippi Main Street Program became a necessity.

Recruited by the Mississippi Main Street Program, the MMSA focuses not only on the physical aspect of Gulfport's enormous rebuilding needs, but also on the community as a whole. In order to truly rebuild Gulfport's historic downtown – the center of the Gulfport community – the MMSA is working to fully understand the community spirit and identity. The MMSA team has introduced the program to the community, including the general public, the city council and the chamber of commerce and is holding workshops to address Gulfport's specific goals in order to execute their downtown master plan. The team has adopted the tagline "After Katrina: Building Back Better than Ever!"

The project highlights what Wilson, formerly an architect of private buildings, loves about his community planning career and business: working with and for community in a branch of architecture, as described by Wilson, "in between urban planning and traditional planning and almost always in the public realm," including neighborhoods, streets, parks and municipal buildings.

"With community planning, I can go into a town that couldn't do a full-blown rebuild and help them. You feel like your efforts in the long run are more valuable. It's really the perfect extension primarily of what I do ministerially," Wilson says.